Langston Hughes is known as a poet of lovely poems like “Dreams” and “April Rain Showers,” which are about pleasant topics. He was, however, on fire as a poet against injustices that sprang from race and class. His poem “The Bitter River” opens with a dedication to Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, who were two 14-year-old black boys who, in 1942, were playmates with a 13-year-old white girl. One day the trio was playing under a bridge when a white man drove by just as the girl ran out from under it, followed by the boys. He reported this as something sinister, and the boys were arrested, charged with attempted rape, and jailed. A white mob came to the jail, took the boys to the bridge, and lynched them. “The Bitter River” is a strong example of Hughes’s activism on behalf of African-Americans because he draws on an actual event in order to create a metaphor that compares a “bitter river” to the injustice, class struggle, and the terror of lynching caused by racism in the Jim Crow South.

The metaphor of a “river/Flowing through the South” (lines 1-2) is extended throughout the poem. The river’s “gall” (line 10), meaning something bitter or severe, and the “blood of the lynched boys” (line 11) is fatal to Blacks. Further, the river drowns the hopes of African Americans and strangles their dreams; it reflects not the sky but the “glint of steel bars” (line 26) that confine innocent people, who were condemned because of their “dark bitter faces” (line 27) rather than because they had committed a crime. The poem also mentions the Scottsboro Boys, who were unjustly jailed after being accused of rape, as well as “the 15¢ mugger” who is behind bars due to a petty crime for which a white person probably would not have been prosecuted.

The river is also used to show the issue of class struggle. No matter how much Blacks learned and were educated, they still were not given the same rights and respect as Whites. Hughes says that education (“the book”) is “useless” (line 17) for Blacks because Whites won’t allow them to use their education to make something of themselves in the world. Hughes is speaking directly to Whites in the poem when he says, “I did not ask for this river / Nor the taste of its bitter brew. / I was given its water / As a gift from you” (lines 50-53), which helps to show the struggle Blacks had for equality. Further, Hughes accuses Whites of underpaying Blacks for the work they do and of making it impossible for Blacks to get out of the cycle of poverty (lines 60-69).

Lynching is not just murdering someone by hanging; the word encompasses any method of murder through the actions of a mob. Between 1882 and 1968, at least 3,500 Black men and women were lynched by White mobs in the Jim Crow South. This was a terror tactic to intimidate Blacks, to keep them from voting or being vocal about the injustices they were suffering. Hughes is “tired of the bitter river” (line 88) and tired of the way Whites treat Blacks; he says Whites have “lynched my comrades” (line 58) and treated Blacks with hatred for much too long.

The overall tone of this poem is of impatience, weariness, and bitterness, yet the poem is moving and inspiring. “The Bitter River” is a blues lament as well as a weary cry from the heart of Langston Hughes. He wants the bitter river that is racism in the South to stop its flow and become a river that reflects stars rather than the “glint of steel bars” (line 26).

Hughes, Langston. “The Bitter River.” *E-texts of Essays and Poems by Langston Hughes*. Web. 18 Jan. 2011.